

## The View of Woman in Rapanui Society Part 2: Rapanui Women as Seen Through the Eyes of Seafarers, Missionaries and Scientists in the Eighteenth Century<sup>1</sup>

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MANY OBSERVATIONS ABOUT RAPANUI WOMEN were recorded from the first arrival of Europeans to Easter Island. In general, the descriptions left by seafarers during the eighteenth century were only of certain groups, that is, those islanders with whom they had contact. This meant that only partial information of the actual reality was noted. One must also consider the short time spent on the island by these early visitors. In addition, outsiders oriented their descriptions toward physical characteristics, and behavior was interpreted from a European perspective.

Between 1722 and 1862, approximately 53 ships arrived and established contact with Rapanui Islanders who lived in the landing areas of Hanga Roa and Hanga O'Honu, although it is not known where many came ashore. In general, "... contact had as its objective the provisioning of the ships, the exchange of products and sexual traffic with the native women" (Cristino 1984:6).

Roggeveen, who arrived in 1722, left the following impression:

It is very remarkable that we saw no more than two or three old women, those wearing a garment reaching from the waist down to below their knees, and another slung on the shoulders: yet so that the skin covering their pendant breasts was bare. But young women and lasses did not come forward amongst the crowd so that one must believe the jealousy of the men had moved them to hide them away in some distant place in the island (Corney 1908).

Behrens, a member of Roggeveen's expedition, noted:

The women had their features streaked for the most part with a red pigment, which is of a much brighter shade than any we have anywhere else seen or found; but we do not know from what they make this beautiful colour. The women were all clothed with red and white wraps; and each had a small hat made of straw or rushes. They sat before us and disrobed, laughed, and were very friendly. Others called from a distance from their houses and beckoned us with the hand to come to them; and there was, in the place where we were standing a village of about twenty houses" (Corney 1908).

Francisco Antonio Aguera Infanzon, a commissioned officer of the frigate *Santa*

*Rosalía* of the Spanish expedition of 1770, under the command of Antonio Domonte, referred to the women thusly:

The women, in particular, come to offer with insistence and demonstrations what each one of them has to give in homage to a man who is infatuated with them, despite the fact that these same men present them as a welcoming offering. Not having been able to verify the method that they observe for distribution, it can only be inferred that the women we have seen are common among them, noting that the old and elderly have some preference in this matter, since they are always the ones who accompany and offer the women and to whom the women show subordination, and not to the young men whom we have never seen court them, so that one observes more composure among the young men than among their elders. The women by nature are modest and bashful; despite their nudity, they manage to cover their breasts as much as they can. Those we have seen make up a small number in proportion to the men, hence one can gather that the men make use of them in common, or that they keep their own hidden, and I believe the latter must be more likely as was manifested the afternoon of the landing; while passing near a small shack, we were able to make out as many as eight women, all maidens, and not bad looking, accompanied by an old man who allowed them only to show their heads and look at us. All of them are generally of pleasant aspect and complexion, which they adulterate with a certain paint the color of vermillion, or very fine minium [lead oxide] with which they dye their faces, although not all of them use it (Mellén Blanco 1986:284-285).



Rapanui woman, drawn by Radiguet, in Dupetit-Thouars (Chauvet 1935).

In 1774, James Cook, had the same impression about the number of women:

They either have but few females among them, or else many were restrained from making their appearance, during our stay; for though we saw nothing to induce us to believe the men were of a jealous disposition, or the women afraid to appear in public, something of this kind is probably the case (Cook 1777:289).

George Peard, who came to the island in 1825 in the ship *Blossom*, under command of Captain Beechey, wrote:

There are two rocks about half a cables length from the shore, one of which was

covered as thick as possible with females who, as we passed them in going on shore, commenced a loud and rather discordant song, I suppose by way of welcome, and that on our landing one of the natives brought a fine woman and offered her to us (Corney 1967:142).

In general, the observations coincide in describing the women as physically very attractive and friendly, offering themselves very willingly to the sailors. Apparently, these were only some of the women, others keeping themselves out of sight of the visitors. Curiously, the Spaniards describe them as modest and bashful, while also being offered to the newcomers by old men.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by a series of episodes that deepened the already existing condition of deterioration that afflicted Rapanui culture. Along with intertribal warfare we see the addition of incursions of whaling ships that spelt death for certain people, as well as slave ships that captured thousands of men and women. This brought an atmosphere of desolation and uncertainty, in which each individual, for survival, must not let down his guard.

Information suggests that the inhabitants of Rapa Nui stopped large-scale cultivation of their fields, and cultivated only areas scarcely sufficient to feed themselves for the fear that tribal adversaries would destroy their crops, or that they would attack to rob their produce.

This situation of chaos greeted the first Catholic missionaries of the Sacred Heart who left some impressions that are interesting to consider with respect to the women's situation:

Beneath the tame and benevolent appearances . . . the natives concealed a character that was disloyal, violent and at times fierce. Many are the times I have witnessed a scene where a man was stabbing his wife in the face or the head to the point of killing or disfiguring her (Roussel 1926:13).

Roussel adds some other impressions about the customs of the islanders. In regard to marriage, he says:

Marriage was agreed upon apparently without consulting the parents. The decision depended only on attraction. Its dissolution lacked any importance whatsoever. The most minor disagreement, the lack of attraction between the spouses, sufficed to break the tie that had united them. The marriage ceremony consisted in raising a thick conical bundle formed of branches of the *hau*, around which was amassed the required amount of food to satiate the guests. The two spouses presided at the feast and took part in it, and when all the food had been consumed, the marriage was confirmed. Marriage between relatives was

considered an abomination, but on the other hand, no harm was seen in bigamy or polygamy; on the contrary, both were grounds for honor. Adopted children were incorporated in the category of legitimate offspring; they were the object of equal care and equal consideration, which, after all, did not exclude a particular predilection for the latter (Roussel 1926:15).

The island population clustered around the missionaries, leaving their ancestral lands in order to live near the missions. Some resisted being Christianized, but were intimidated "...by the armed catechumen, of all tribes, who reduced them by force, concentrating them in the missions of Hanga Roa and Vaihu" (Cristino 1984:9).

From the description of the missionaries, we see a patriarchal society with an aggressive attitude toward women, a society in which a woman, while although living under man's dominion, has the liberty to choose her mate but also to dissolve

these ties, due to whatever disagreement, in the same way as men do. This is corroborated by Linton Palmer, who came to the island in 1868: "Marriage was not fixed by the parents, but by the parties themselves; and any quarrelling or strife was sufficient for a divorce, each party being then free to marry again" (Palmer 1870:281).

Curiously, a few years later, in 1882, Geiseler noted the opposite, saying that marriages were arranged by parents at an early age, which was the custom of the royal family, but that common folks continued the same rules. "Between the ages of 17 and 20 the young man built his own hut and took his wife, forming a separate family from then on." Geiseler added that, before the young women were taken to the husband's house, they were absolutely free to do whatever they wanted, and in some cases, even to have several lovers. He justifies this attitude as due to the scarcity of women and the large numbers of men. He claims that monogamy existed, saying: "It was a firm law that a man might have only one wife, and not even the rulers were allowed to break it" (Geiseler 1883). This left open the possibility of the existence of other women in the life of a man, in a secret way. According to a census updated in 1886, the total population of the island was 158 inhabitants, of whom 65 were men and

41 were women, the remainder being children.

Contrarily, Roussel brings up the existence of bigamy and polygamy, possibly due to the existence of more women, or perhaps the result of the slave raids that took away most of the island's men before 1863. The estimated population around 1868 was 1200. It should be taken into consideration that



Easter Island woman wearing a hat and displaying elongated ear lobes. From Cook's voyage (In Stephen Chauvet, 1935).

Roussel was on the island approximately 14 years before Geiseler, and that the population had changed considerably after 1868 due to epidemics, as a result of contact with the outside, and the significant exodus of a number of islanders, who left for Tahiti and Mangareva with the missionaries.

There is evidence of the scarcity of women in a report by Guillermo Bate, physician of the Chilean Navy corvette *O'Higgins*, on a visit to the island in 1870. Bate noted "...the scarce proportion of women in relation to men had forced the missionaries to consent to the marriage of excessively young girls, not even nubile yet, which provoked in them an accelerated consumption" (Bate 1885:488-500).

In this situation, adultery existed and, in the case of women, was severely punished. There was no reference to punishment for the men, only that the relationship could be easily dissolved by the simple fact that one no longer wanted to be with one's spouse. According to Geiseler:

If adultery was discovered, the punishment varied according to rank; a chief's wife was usually killed by her husband or his brother, or in less serious cases she was severely beaten, or thrown out of the house and the marriage thereby dissolved. Among ordinary people the adulteress was usually whipped. (Corney 1967)

Sexual relations amongst relatives appear to have been prohibited, a situation that is affirmed by ancient accounts. This helps us to understand the first seafarers' observations regarding certain women who were offered to the sailors, possibly as an alternative because of the ties of kinship prevented marriage. Undoubtedly, this does not discard the existence of an interest in obtaining certain objects that were highly regarded and desired, as payment for sex.

Roussel's (1926) account mentions the acceptance of adoption as a custom, which is reaffirmed in legends and episodes of ancient history, but he adds something interesting: the adopted child does not have the favor of its adoptive parents, who gave preferential consideration to their own children.

The missionaries offered an alternative to the Rapanui, although that implied giving up their violent practices. It also meant a change in the culture itself, resulting from the introduction of a series of prohibitions that produced changes in the patterns of behavior. Behavioral changes were initially without internal conviction, but rather for their usefulness of obtaining material goods as personal recognition before the community for their Christian attitudes. This allowed for a certain status, particularly in front of visitors.

The missionaries prohibited the islanders from going about nude and forbid the practice of tattoo. They limited the islanders' freedom in matrimony and in breaking its ties. But although the missionaries established great changes, one has to consider that they did not stay long on the island, only a few years, and that was interrupted by long periods of absence. During the years without the priests, the island was left in the hands of catechists who had been trained for that task, and who preferred to dedicate themselves to worship. Estella leaves the following impression of the catechist, Ure Potahi [Nicholas Pakarati], who had been instructed by the missionaries in Tahiti

and who returned to the island in August of 1888. Ure Potahi arrived in the corvette *Angamos*, under the command of Policarpo Toro, who came to take possession of the island:

Nicolas Pakarati is a strong, relatively still agile, 80-year-old man. He is married to Isabel Tenatene and has fourteen children and numerous grandchildren; he is an excellent man, of sane judgment, pure heart and very noble soul. He was the sacristan for the missionaries, and ever since they left, he has been in charge of the church and is the catechist for the island. He rings the bell, presides at prayers, makes simple and suitable exhortations, baptizes the children, authorizes and presides at weddings and prepares the sick to die well (Estella 1920:103).

Beginning in 1895, the island was leased out to the Merlet Company, which turned it into a large sheep ranch. By 1903 this company was succeeded by the Sociedad Explotadora de Isla de Pascua, also called the Williamson & Balfour Company. This resulted in a radical change in the islanders' way of life, and even though a cycle of traditional activities persisted on some levels, stockbreeding became the main activity (Cristino 1984:19).

According to a census conducted by a government representative in 1896, there were 214 inhabitants, with an equal number of men and women (Sanchez 1921:15). During this time the administrators of the company also performed the duties of government representatives, somehow exercising a coercive force in confronting the traditional practices. Estella wrote:

There was on the island, and not long ago, a ruthless administrator of the Explotadora Society who oppressed the poor *kanakas*, abusing their simplicity and patience, and shielded by his authority, he tried to satisfy with impunity his criminal desires and those of his partners in immorality. To his administrative headquarters he took all the women he fancied, forcing them if it was necessary, and added that the women were rescued and returned to their respective houses, having whipped them beforehand as punishment for consenting to the violation of their honor. Confronted with this, the administrator goes before the king and says: Why do you take the women out of my house? Because they all have husbands; they are married and they must not be separated one from the other (Estella 1921:18-19).

This account by the missionary seems to imply that it was a voluntary act on the part of the women to go with the administrator and his men, and is corroborated by the fact that the women were beaten. This would not have occurred if it had been a certainty that they were abducted.

These impressions of exploitation and misery were reaffirmed through other reports, such as that of Vicar Castrense Zosimo Valenzuela who arrived in 1911 with a scientific team in the corvette *Baquedano*:

The men were semi-nude, barefoot and with a hat made of straw and banana fibers; the women were barely covered by a kind of short unsewn gown, some carrying a little one who was sucking on a piece of sugar cane. The boys mostly went unclothed, and the girls wore a short shirt or a raggedy dirty gown (Cristino 1984:21).

These descriptions could coincide in certain measure with the scene at that time; but they do not correspond precisely with a situation of poverty. They may simply reflect a lack of certain objects introduced from abroad, and reflect a compulsory appropriateness by the priests and lay persons of Western Christian morals.

Walter Knoche (1912:466) was commissioned to establish a meteorological station on the island. He wrote:

It was impossible to take a photo of a nude body. They cast this aside with the words, 'We are Christians'. Only the majority of the ladies, habitually angry, as soon as night would fall, did not completely oppose the sale of their charms in the form of items of clothing.

This information is from the same period as that of Vicar Valenzuela and from a few years before the arrival of Bienvenido de Estella; it introduces a different view of women, providing evidence that although certain Christian codes existed, there also was a form of proper behavior for the islanders.

In 1914 Ignacio Vives Solar was named as maritime sub-delegate to supervise the actions of the company in relation to the islanders. And, from time to time the island was visited by priests, coming on the Chilean navy ships. Years after the visit of the vicar, Bienvenido de Estella and Monsignor Edwards came to the island in 1917 and Father Estella returned in 1918 with Domingo de Beire. Estella describes the socio-economical situation in the island at that time:

There is no food. A few bananas, some sweet potatoes, other wild roots; from day to day, some raw or badly cooked fish and the most fortunate manage to get some piece of sugar cane to suck on. Meat, never or nearly never. Bread and flour are unknown. There is neither corn, potatoes, rice, coffee, tea nor mate . . . nothing. They live in forty huts, most of them of wood, and some of un-worked stone. They dress in the tatters of the clothes that are given to them, the women in a white gown that covers them from neck to feet, and the boys under 8 years old go around naked. They are clean of body, like to bathe and do so frequently at the seashore. But the houses are devoid of beds or any utensils necessary for life. They sleep on straw piled up on the floor and have no chairs, tables or furnishings of any kind; they do not own dishes, table settings or other domestic utensils. They grow bananas, sweet potatoes and other indigenous tubers in small plots. The women can sew, and they wash rather well: they ordinarily refuse to do agricultural work. The men are very fond of horses. They are unsurpassable swimmers and excellent rowers. . . (Estella 1920:107-108).

This desolate view, from the perspective of the outsider, seems to be common among churchmen and does not always concur with other reports from people who lived for an extended period of time on the island, a situation that was not the case with missionaries.

As a result of the political events in Chile in 1932, some people were sent to the island as political exiles and one of these left some interesting observations:

The influence of the Catholic missionaries has demolished the valuable edifice of primitive culture, transforming its beliefs and disorganizing them socially, under the pretext

of instilling into them a religion that could never agree with their true habits and instincts. They think they have erased from the mind of the natives their beliefs, adapting them to Western ones, but they have only managed to translate for them into the new language the same mysterious divinities of this Polynesian island. The confusion of religious ideas has also put an end to those moral principles, which under their supernatural power, had helped them resolve their material conflicts (Charlin Ojeda 1933).

Referring to women, Charlin Ojeda (1933:24,25) wrote:

Women do not require complete submission from their lovers, and neither do they give any guarantees. Polyandrous, in the full sense of the word, they are eugenic in their amorous intrigues. They are not bothered by comments on their actions because they do not even have the judgmental conscience created by the Christian moral of our 2000 years of slavery. And neither do they fear the consequences because family organization establishes that children are reared by the godparents who care for them from the time they are born without the parents ever taking an interest. Love of this nature has its reason for being in a society like Rapa Nui's, given its matriarchal origin, as in the other Polynesian islands, and as such, tends to facilitate, by all means, the island's demographic increase in sexual sublimation or individual selection in accordance with certain rules of aesthetics and convenience for future results, from which they have been successful in producing a vigorous, intelligent and beautiful race.

In 1934 a census counted 456 inhabitants, declaring that probably only 159 persons were of pure Rapanui ancestry (Porteous 1981:157). The rest were of mixed ancestry, the product of unions with persons in transit as well as a few Chilean or foreign residents (the outsiders numbered only 8 in 1922 and 20 in 1936). This means that from 1896 until the census, the population had increased from 214 to 456 inhabitants, a significant amount. In 1936 the continuous offering of catechism was established with the arrival of Father Sebastian Englert, who remained on the island until his death in 1969.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The paper was written in the context of a research project on gender relations on Easter Island during 1996 and 1997. The research was made possible by Grant #1960146 of the Chilean financing agency Fondecyt (Fondo para el Desarrollo de la Investigación Científica y Tecnológica). Co-researchers in the project were anthropologists Riet Delsing and Eliana Largo.

This article, the second in a series of three studies of gender relations in Rapanui society, provides a view of women as deduced from the accounts of sailors, missionaries and scientists. The first, published in the June issue of *Rapa Nui Journal* (v.14, 2) examines the role of women as deduced from myths.

The third study will be presented in a forthcoming issue of *Rapa Nui Journal*. It will cover the period from 1919 to today and will include life stories of various informants. From the life stories, certain topics are highlighted

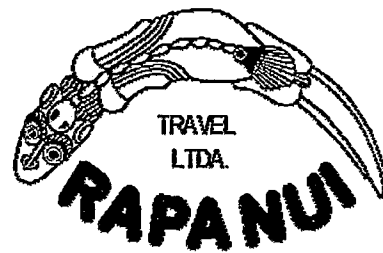
to give a deeper understanding of the role of women within Rapanui society during that period of time. A global analysis will be made of selected topics, inserting textual transcriptions of the informants' words.

*Translated by Louise Noel.*

<sup>2</sup>Ana Maria Arredondo attended Universidad Católica in Valparaíso, Chile. She teaches history and Social Science, and has lived on Easter Island since 1978. Aside from working for the University of Chile on the island from 1982-1984, she has taught at the Liceo Lorenzo Baeza Vega, and was in charge of the Unidad Técnico Pedagógica y Orientación. Today she is the co-owner of the Aukara Art Gallery, on Rapa Nui. Arredondo's research (dealing with tattoo, wood carving, art, legend, traditional medicine, and gender) has been published in many books and Journals.

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